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SUBJECT: A "FURIOUS" SARKOZY DECIDES TO PROCEED WITH HIS
ALGERIA STATE VISIT AFTER BOUTEFLIKA CALLS

REF: PARIS POINTS FOR NOVEMBER 28 AND 29

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt
for reasons 1.4. (b), (d).

¶1. (U) Just as the French government was on the verge of cancelling President Sarkozy's state visit to Algeria next week (see refs), Algerian President Bouteflika phoned Sarkozy November 29 to calm things down. He reportedly assured Sarkozy that the minister who was publicly quoted making anti-semitic remarks about Sarkozy did not speak for the Algerian government and that what he said "did not at all reflect the position of Algeria." French media, which zeroed in on the story November 27, reported Bouteflika's phone call and statement in Algiers dissociating his government from the personal opinions that might be expressed by officials not "mandated by the Algerian constitution to speak on foreign affairs, i.e., himself, the foreign minister, and others designated to do so. Sarkozy cleared up any doubt as to whether the trip would go ahead when, in a nationally televised interview November 29, he said that, following his conversation with Bouteflika, he would go to Algeria & as a friend.

¶2. (C) Word of Bouteflika's statement and the apparent easing of this latest and mostly symbolic crisis in the often difficult Franco-Algerian relationship almost immediately followed the phone call between the two presidents. PolMinCouns and poloff met November 29 with French Presidency adviser on NEA affairs Boris Boillon, who was fully engaged in trying to head off the cancellation of a state visit he had been meticulously planning for the past several weeks. He described Sarkozy as & furious over the & racist and anti-semitic remarks that Algerian Minister of Veterans Affairs Abbes had made and inclined to pull the plug on the visit only days before it was to start. According to Boillon, Sarkozy instructed his staff to summon the Algerian ambassador November 28 to protest Abbes, remarks and demand, at a minimum, some sort of official Algerian statement dissociating itself from them if not actually condemning them. Sarkozy also indicated that he expected Bouteflika to telephone him to discuss the matter personally before deciding whether to proceed with the visit.

¶3. (C) Boillon did not describe the meeting with the Algerian ambassador in detail but said that he had asked the ambassador to consider how the Algerians would have reacted had a French minister said & even one tenth of what Abbes reportedly said. The ambassador clearly got the message, and Boillon received a phone call during our meeting setting the time just after lunch for Bouteflika to call.

¶4. (C) Boillon indicated that Sarkozy would have liked Bouteflika to fire the offending minister but would not explicitly demand such an action out of concern that the Algerians would over-react and a new crisis would ensue over French & interference in Algerian internal affairs.

Nevertheless, it was critical that Algeria somehow publicly account for these offensive remarks. Having worked hard on the visit, Boillon argued Algeria had much more to lose than France by a sudden cancellation on grounds like these. In addition to a number of bilateral accords that would be signed, the French had quite a few contracts to sign.

15. (C) Comment: The decision to proceed with the visit even after Bouteflika's phone call has not pleased everyone. Some media pointed out that Bouteflika did not condemn Abbas or what he said per se. The Socialist opposition, moreover, has played up both Abbas' remarks and the even harsher statements of other Algerian veterans of the war of independence -- declaring Sarkozy unwelcome as long as France refuses to repent for its colonial rule -- to criticize Sarkozy's decision to go ahead with the visit. Boillon, who served in Algeria on his maiden overseas posting as a French diplomat, evinced a keen understanding of the internal political dynamics that made it difficult for Bouteflika, himself a veteran of the war of independence, to entirely disavow Abbas' statements or sack him. They are of the same mentality and generation, stuck in the 1960s or maybe the 1970s. Still, he added, Bouteflika and others in the Algerian government needed to understand that remarks like these resonate and have a negative impact in France that makes it hard for Sarkozy to ignore. Boillon noted the irony of many of the leaders of Algeria's veterans organizations having children living and working in France, not to mention French bank accounts and real estate holdings.

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